Street groupwork in Kolkata

Tarun Banerjee, Sagarika Banerjee and Mark Doel*

Abstract: The authors use the term 'street groupwork' to present the practices of Bharat Bhavna (literal translation: India thinking), a community-based movement in the Maniktala district of Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal. Notions of time and place are used to contrast street groupwork with more formalised groupwork, referencing the Gandhian notion of swadeshi, a commitment to immediate surroundings. This is not a parochial devotion, and the chapter explores how street groupworkers build alliances with other groups, linking groupwork with community organisation. Street groupwork is fluid, inventive and improvisational, and the group leaders live the lives of the community with whom they work. The style of their work is best described as immersive and the range of activities is enormous, from small group Indian dance classes to large-scale environmental and social justice campaigning. An explicit social and political philosophy lies at the heart of street groupwork – the Maniktala manifestation is environmental and socialist – with a mission to educate 'the street' to develop political awareness through group activities. The authors make the case that it is important to recognise the groupwork in street groupwork, and its significance for the wider family of group practice.

Keywords: community development; festival; geographical indications; group work; Kolkata; social education; street culture.

Address for correspondence: markdoel@icloud.com

Tarun Banerjee is an engineer by profession and training. His chief social activity is the development of 'science thinking' with students via the Bharat Bhavna Organisation with youth. He is President of the West Bengal Socialist Party, a strong advocate of democratic socialism, in particular environmental (green) socialism, and he engages with a wide variety of people's movements – agrarian and human rights movements and environmentalists. He leads free coaching centres and develops cultural programmes to educate young people in the slums, using music, dance and drama.

Sagarika Banerjee For the last 14 years, Sagarika Banerjee has promoted social and environmental movements in West Bengal and other parts of India. She is a cultural educational activist within Bharat Bhavna, working with groups in slum areas to teach

and perform dance, drama and recitation, and forming self-help groups with distressed women. She has taken part in the Save Gandamardan and the Niyam Giri hills and jungle movement to preserve tribal habitat and livelihoods, and has organised cultural programmes on environmental awareness. She is a National Executive committee member of the Socialist Party of India.

Dr Mark Doel, *Emeritus Professor, Sheffield Hallam University, has twenty years of direct social work experience in community-based neighbourhood practice and trained in groupwork at the National Institute for Social Work in London. He has published widely in the fields of groupwork, practice education, ethics, and material culture and social work. He is past Vice President of the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG), co-Chair of the Nether Edge Festival in Sheffield, England, and an active member of the British Labour Party.*

Acknowldgement

Preface

In a courtyard in Kolkata (Calcutta) a group of four Indian women are positioning to take a selfie. They are visiting the villa of Rabindranath Tagore, one of India's finest poets and philosophers. It is proving a challenge to get an angle that can include both the famous courtyard and their small group. A European man's offer to take their photograph is quickly accepted, and they all get talking. 'What do you do?' they ask. 'I'm a social worker,' he replies. There is an explosion of warm laughter: 'We are all social workers, too!' they say.

It was the beginning of a profound and continuing personal and professional friendship between the three authors of this chapter. Mark, the European man, was quickly invited by Sagarika, one of the four women, to her flat in the Maniktala district of Kolkata, where he met her husband, Tarun, along with many of the members of the Bharat Bhavna *group (literal translation:* India thinking*). It became clear that they were doing something special and Mark accepted a pressing request to return, to live and work with them in the north Kolkata estates. Mark knew that he could learn much from them and hoped he might contribute in some small way. Tarun and Sagarika were keen to involve him, generously opening their home and accepting him into their community.*

Mark returned for a third time in February 2020, to spend another week living and working together, just before the pandemic froze everything (and a fourth time in 2023). We agreed that we should let the wider world know of this work. Mark is the scribe because of his command of English, but this story belongs to Tarun, Sagarika, Bharat Bhavna *and their community.*

Introduction

Social groupwork has long embraced a wide variety of activities and philosophies (Cohen, Doel, Wilson, Quirke, Ring and Abbas 2012; Doel and Kelly 2014; Garvin, Gutiérrez and Galinsky 2004; Mullender, Ward and Fleming 2013). Much of Mark's groupwork practice has been 'classic' – a group of about eight or so people meeting for a couple of hours, usually weekly for an agreed period of time in an enclosed space, and with specific purpose. However, he has long been interested in those manifestations of groupwork that exist outside this paradigm.

One such manifestation is the group process that happens intuitively, in the absence of a trained or appointed groupworker. We will call it 'everyday groupwork'. These instances are common in human society, yet they are seldom called out as groupwork. Another unremarked phenomenon is the sudden surge of *groupness,* often in the face of a crisis, which we might name 'flash groupwork' because it can arise as unexpectedly as a flash flood (Doel 2012; Johnson 2008). Flash groupwork can occur when previously unassociated individuals become aware of a common need or threat and organise themselves spontaneously, perhaps forming small task and support groups, and assuming various group roles such as leadership, nurturing, challenging, and marshalling resources both within the new group and outside it. Flash groups dissipate as quickly as they arise, though they can generate life-long friendship groups.

This chapter explores another form of non-mainstream groupwork that combines the fluidity of everyday groupwork and the responsiveness of flash groupwork with a politicised community development approach. We will refer to this as 'street groupwork' or, on occasion, Maniktala groupwork in deference to the streets in Kolkata where it is practised. It is rooted in a strongly articulated belief system, owing much to the socialism of Subhas Chandra Bose, known as Netaji (Pelinka 2015), and transformed by environmentalism to 'green socialism' (Zhang 2010). It has taken root in the slums of north Kolkata over several years and continues to mobilise and sustain those communities. Those who lead this work do not label themselves as groupworkers, though they do describe themselves as social workers and social activists. However, what they do is at the very heart of groupwork and the methods they use with large and small groups of people are recognisable to any

conventionally trained groupworker. This chapter will explore what this street groupwork is, how it works, and what can be learned from it.

Literature Review

Exploring Other Literatures

We have given the name 'street groupwork' to the work of *Bharat Bhavna* because it seems there is little in the existing English-language groupwork literature that combines groupwork with community and cultural development, still less when hitched to a political movement of conscientisation, civic mobilisation, education and social activism. The fluid, immersive activities of *Bharat Bhavna* resonate with Lee et al's (1996) account of direct intervention in youth gangs in Hong Kong, though that kind of street work tends to rely on *outsiders* rather than the combination of insider/outsider work of *Bharat Bhavna;* and there is considerably more ambition in the scope of the Maniktala groupworkers, not least the duration of its existence over several decades.

The philosophy of living and working and *being* your own community, and of owning the community's problems, was central to early social work in the Settlement House Movement (Burnham 2012), but is now rare in a western context and often negatively reframed as 'over-identification'. You can imagine the response of a practice educator (field instructor) to a student on a social work placement declaring they *owned* their community's problems. The phenomenon is not unknown in the West – witness Bob Holman's (1988) life/work amalgam in Glasgow's Easterbrook estate and Judy Lee's (2001) move to Nicaragua to join a community of women who experienced expolitation and marginalisation – but it is rare, and perhaps becoming more so. In contrast, immersiveness is *the* authentic way to practise in many developing countries (Sokhela 2013; 2017).

In exploring the literature, then, we will benefit from adventuring beyond the usual comfort zone, and taking a journey into the alleyways, one that is congruent with the experience of street groupwork itself. As an example of literature not badged 'groupwork', take Granta's *The Group,* which throws light on everyday groups by asking 16 writers to compose a short story triggered by a group photograph from the past

(Granta 2002). Each provides a fascinating narrative of group life, fluid and immersive just like the Maniktala groupwork, yet unlikely to be reckoned within the groupwork literature.

  Street groupwork and, more particularly *Maniktala* groupwork, deliberately reference place in their soubriquet. A strong sense of place is a central tenet in this form of groupwork. Indeed, living this immersive experience feels like an extraordinary one-take film in which there is a seemingly continuous shot (such as *Русский ковчег* [*Russian Ark*]; *Birdman*; and *1917)*. Street groupwork is a procession, a coalescing, a falling by the wayside, a re-grouping, all on the move. Walking is at its heart (Kagge 2018).

Swadeshi

Gandhi defined swadeshi as 'that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our *immediate surroundings* to the exclusion of the more remote' (Kapur, 2016: 113). The social work that briefly flowered in the UK in the 1970s/80s has strong, yet unrecognised, links to *swadeshi*. It became known as patchwork (working one's local 'patch'), neighbourhood work, locality work and sometimes community social work (Barclay 1980; Hadley and McGrath 1980). The then newly-unified Social Services Departments organised teams of social workers around the geography of neighbourhoods rather than by client group or function. It is the nearest approach of UK social work to street groupwork, but with the notable difference that British social workers received a regular salary from the state and these Indian street groupworkers certainly do not.

  From the field of economic geography the notion of *geographical indications* resonates with street groupwork. In *Made Only in India*, Kapur (2016) explores that specific sense of place that is unique to certain goods:

> Indian handicrafts are not products of individual artists […] searching for a method of intense self-expression. It is an art of the people, which means that skills are not in the hands of individuals, but have seeped, spread and taken root through time, through generations, through communities, through music and dance, rituals and prayers (Jaitly 1990: 9, in Kapur 2016:41).

As with *Maniktala* groupwork, the soubriquets of geographical indications reference the place: monsooned *Malabar* coffee, *Chanderi* sarees, *Darjeeling* tea. The French know this significance of locale as *terroir*, first and foremost applied to a wine – the unique and distinct flavour that comes from *this* grape variety in *this* soil at *this* elevation in *this* climate with *these* traditions of viniculture – but, by metaphorical extension, applicable not just to products but to experiences, skills and practices that are rooted in their locale. As Kapur (2016) noted earlier, in the Indian context this is not individual self-expression, rather it is the well-spring of a whole community. It is the accumulation of shared experience over many generations.

These notions of inter-connectedness are not new, and they are not unknown in Western political philosophy. Almost a century ago, the social ethicist Tawney referred to this inter-connectedness as a social order. He wrote (in the gendered language of the time):

> Few tricks of the unsophisticated intellect are more curious than the naive psychology of the business man, who ascribes his achievements to his unaided efforts, in blind unconsciousness of a social order without whose continuous support and vigilant protection he would be a lamb bleating in the desert (Tawney 1926: 264).

In its own anarchic way, street groupwork brings – or springs from – a social order. At times it specifically focuses on diffusing inter-group conflict, a phenomenon that groupworkers are familiar with. In-group/out-group dynamics and inter-group conflicts feature strongly in any understanding of group process. At a social level, these conflicts manifest themselves as culture wars, most starkly witnessed in the Indian context in communal rioting between Hindu and Moslem groups; and in the British context through the hostility between Brexiteers and Remainers that continues beyond the 2016 referendum about membership of the European Union. Goodhart (2017) theorises these divisions as the differences between the *Anywheres* and the *Somewheres* – a very clear reference to place. The *Anywheres* have achieved identities that are portable and the world is their oyster, whilst The *Somewheres'* identity remains rooted in their locale.

Kolkata

Given the insights from the notion of *geographical indications*, it is important to note the literature about Kolkata itself. It is the third largest urban area in India, with over 14 million inhabitants in the metropolitan area (almost twice London or New York). Kolkata became a byword for decay: 'a metaphor for urban disaster, as the worst possibility of urbanism, as modernity gone astray' (Chattopadhyay 2006: 2-3), reflected in the cinematography of two of the city's great auteurs, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak (Sarkar 2009). Any rehabilitation is confined to the gentrification in the upper-end property market and middle class malls, and certainly not in Maniktala.

> These rapidly urbanizing cities … are marked by issues of mass unemployment, widespread illiteracy, the explosive growth of slums, snarling traffic congestion, loss of public and green spaces, alarming levels of water and air pollution, and a general deterioration of infrastructure and services (Bose 2015: 76).

Historically, Calcutta was the capital of the British Raj until 1913 and the cultural and political heart of India. It was a 'primate city' (Sassen 2012), of international importance and disproportionately dominant, with a proliferation of what Bose (2005: 78) calls 'associational life' – group life, both formal and informal. Large waves of refugees followed the 1971 war in which East Bengal (Bangladesh) achieved independence from Pakistan, and the political instability in the Indian West Bengali state of which Kolkata is the capital. Huge infrastructure projects like the Kolkata Metro (Asia's first underground rail system) and bridges across the Hooghly river, a tributary of the Ganges, played their part in large-scale evictions of the poor and pavement-dwellers, amounting to hundreds of thousands of people. A change in power from Communist to Congress party made no difference to long-standing policies where 'the poor and their needs are ignored, while investment in real estate for middle class buyers is encouraged, with only minimal attention paid to affordable housing' (Bose 2015: 87).

Many of Kolkata's difficulties arise from this *contested space*. It is not just the growing middle classes contesting the urban spaces of poor people, but the spaces contested between developers and environmentalists, notably over the East Kolkata Wetlands. Maniktala

groupwork is inseparable from these notions of place and contested space. It is a part of the fight for what post-colonial urban scholars promote as the idea of the 'ordinary city' as opposed to the 'world city', the latter seen as one that increases social and economic divisions, sustaining wealthy gated communities serviced by an increasingly poor underclass (Bose 2015: 56).

Connections with the IASWG Standards

The fluid, immersive nature of Maniktala street groupwork does not lend itself easily to measurement. Even so, as groupworkers, we want and need to engage with the various groupwork paradigms around the world in order to find common meanings and learn from one another.

The first section of the IASWG groupwork standards identifies a bullet list of essential knowledge and core values, all of which are pertinent to street groupwork, in particular the requirement to pay heed to context. However, street groupwork relies heavily on the insider's knowledge that comes from living and working in the heart of the community served, a kind of street-wisdom that is not highlighted in the Standards and might not be especially prized in formalised groupwork settings.

Those Standards that emphasise multiple helping relationships and mutual aid are reflected in the experience of street groupwork, but the efficacy and impact of Maniktala groupwork relies considerably on strong direction from the *Bharat Bhavna* community leaders. In part this is because much of the work is with youth who benefit from clear role modelling, and partly it is an expression of the social value attributed to charismatic leadership. The Standards speak more directly to the culture of a groupwork practised in individualistic liberal democracies.

Those sections of the Standards that concern themselves with stages in group development (§3–§6) are the most difficult to square with street groupwork because of the linear assumptions of terms like 'pre-group phase', 'beginning, middle and ending phases'. Using the language of Western groupwork models, street groupwork is open-membership and open-ended, but these terms straight-jacket the reality. Street groupwork is more procession than process, and though particular stations in the procession might hint at beginnings

and endings within each stopping, the whole is considerably more than this linear model would have us understand.

For some Western groupworkers, a practice that does not have a specific goal (group, individual or otherwise) and has no discernible beginning, middle and ending, might seem unworthy of being called groupwork. However, the *experience* of street groupwork feels authentic, indeed more so than some manifestations of manualised, proceduralised groups – a small glass of *terroir* wine rather than a tumblerful of the industrial stuff.

Above all, notions such as purpose, task and goal are the ones that most separate these different forms of groupwork. These terms (purpose, etc.) are frequently used uncritically, as though they are obvious, but there is a world of difference between a formalised written goal and the broad social and educational aspirations of Maniktala groupwork. Certainly, *Bharat Bhavna* has short-term aims such as helping young people into employment, but its moral purpose, the reason for its being, is the procession towards a utopia. There is a similar disjunction when we consider the central place of evaluation in empirical Western groupwork.

When viewed from Kolkata, the language of much of the IASWG Standards ('Develop and articulate verbally and/or in writing a clear statement of group purpose that reflects member needs and, where appropriate, agency mission') feels like it is beamed from a far-off place.

Maniktala Street Groupwork

The Nigerian poet and author Helon Habila writes of his close relationship with a fellow poet: 'We'd become friends immediately. I was from Gombe State in the north [of Nigeria], and Toni from Delta State in the south-east, and that meant we were supposed to be wary of each other. But our common aims proved greater than our different backgrounds,' (Habila 2002: 152). From most biographical perspectives, the life situations of the co-authors of this chapter are also quite different – except for our political values. These values are complex, but best represented as environmental socialism. It is these political values that easily transcend all those other differences of identity. It is these values that are the driving force of the Maniktala manifestation of street groupwork.

Social and Political Philosophy

It is fitting, then, to begin our exploration of Maniktala street groupwork with a consideration of its social and political philosophy. Some biographical background for the leaders of *Bharat Bhavna* will help to understand the underlying philosophy:

Tarun Banerjee sums up his philosophy as 'High thinking and Simple living'. He trained in mechanical and civil engineering, hence the interesting strand of science thinking and model building in his interpretation of socialism. In 1992 he created *Bijñāna Bhavna* (Science Thinkers) to put his philosophy into practice, working with the Kolkata Canalside Society to establish a school and a science programme for squatters there. He experiences the established political party system as hidebound and corrupt and finds it to be wary of people like himself who come from poverty. Above all, he sees the need for a form of education that is not driven by the so-called needs of the economy, in effect the needs of capitalism. Amongst its many activities, *Bharat Bhavna* catches drop-outs from schooling, uses street groupwork methods to train them in various disciplines, and involves them in group programmes of cultural development and political awareness. These group activities develop social and political consciousness as well as practical skills towards local self-employment, such as rope making, juice-making, mirror making and selling.

Sagarika Banerjee became involved in various social justice movements such as the Gandamardan Hill alliance, where she went to join the tribes-people to help in their struggle to protect their livelihood and the environment (we will return to this later). She continues to promote various protest movements in support of rape victims to secure justice against rapists, whose families were used to paying off the victim's family so the rapist escaped justice. This has been successfully challenged and changed. She developed the women's craft movement *(Swanisvar Gosti)* in rural West Bengal, which enables women to come together to express their creativity, keep traditional crafts alive and generate an income for themselves and their communities. As a classically trained dancer, she teaches Indian dance to groups as part of the *Bharat Bhavna* activities. She has stood in the Kolkata City Elections and is active in the Women's Conference of the Socialist Party of India.

Both Tarun and Sagarika believe in empowerment through political organising and social activism and teach democratic socialism to

the students in the programmes. Parents and community members are actively involved, supporting the young people by attending performances and joining in competitions. Altogether there are a couple of dozen community organisers within the *Bharat Bhavna* association.

Activities

Perhaps we can best get a sense of Maniktala street groupwork by considering the range of activities that are undertaken. It is the breadth and depth of the programme that characterises street groupwork. Indeed, the comprehensive groupwork service that Mark and a colleague developed in an English Social Service Department (Doel and Sawdon 2006) pales in comparison to the ambitious scope of *Bharat Bhavna*, both in kind and in scale:

- Model-making camps
- Science exhibitions
- Drawing camps and competitions
- Football tournaments
- Schooling for 'vagabond' boys and girls
- Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Maths workshops
- Mime workshops and performances
- Dance workshops and performances
- Drama workshops and performances
- Educational tours
- Yoga workshops
- Blood donation camps
- Rakhi hand-binding festival
- Campaigns: for natural herbal remedies, including acupressure therapy;
- Environmental campaigns - planting trees, seminars, global warming education, jungle movements to save hillsides and tribal habitats;
- Women's rights campaigns and against violence to women.

From this bare list, it becomes apparent that *Bharat Bhavna's* activities encompass a great variety of small and large groupwork, from the closed indoor intimacy of an all-female classical Indian dance class to the very public, open-air environment of mass campaigning.

Improvised Life on the Street

In Kolkata, life is lived in the street, halted neither by night-time nor monsoon, and sustained by year-round warmth. This has produced a street culture (Ross 2021), and it is natural that groupwork should be street-based, too. Because of the narrowness of the streets, especially in the Maniktala district, it is people and not vehicles that are in charge. The group's procession through the streets is halted frequently as it comes across people already clustering at street corners or it is beckoned down an alleyway to merge with some other grouping.

There are elements, too, that are recognisable as more formalised and static: the indoors meetings in the flat that *Bharat Bhavna* uses for educative sessions, for discussion and planning, for preparing and eating communal meals, and for music and song. R–– is a boy who is very talented with the hand-drum, able both to lead and follow the group's rhythm. On the street he gets into scraps with other lads, perhaps they tease him about his weight. In the group, though, he comes into his own.

The groups are only loosely connected to time – and it is diurnal rather than clock time. So, a performance for family and community will take place 'in the evening', not 'at 7pm'. It begins when things are ready – this evening there's a strong breeze, so it proves challenging to fix the backcloth banners in place, and things take a bit longer. People drift in and out. During one event we ask Mark to sing something. The tones of *'Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms'* seem so strange and other-worldly, even to Mark's own ears, now that they are sandwiched between the microtonal sounds and rhythms of Indian music-making. A metaphor, no doubt.

In addition to the immersive fluidity of Maniktala street groupwork, a central characteristic is its capacity for improvisation. Street groupwork has grown organically and, as such, it survives by being responsive to its context. In this way it both reflects the community's resilience and contributes to it. An example of this combination of respect for tradition and adapting it to current purpose is *rakhi* (hand-binding). Traditionally used between brother and sister, Tagore adapted it in the early twentieth century to bind Moslem and Hindu – a literal and symbolic binding to show solidarity between two communities that are frequently in violent conflict with one another. *Bharat Bhavna* has used this same method to combat civil unrest and division, a revival of a ritual social activity in response to inter-group conflict.

The COVID-19 pandemic placed great demands on community responsiveness (though we must remind ourselves that, worldwide, 26,000 people die each and every week from tuberculosis – an entirely treatable disease but one that barely touches the affluent West, unlike COVID-19). The social distancing of lockdown goes against the grain in communities like Maniktala, and is impractical because of the crowded living and working conditions. In these circumstances *Bharat Bhavna* responded rapidly to the crisis, especially in respect of the abandoned migrant workers who faced starvation, by opening a daily soup kitchen, the *Asha* (Hope) Community Kitchen, which rapidly grew to serve between 200 and 300 beneficiaries each day. In addition, food and clothes parcels were delivered through the community; and when the *Aumphun* super-cyclone struck in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, deluging 70% of the south Kolkata district of Sundar Bon and destroying many hundreds of homes, again *Bharat Bhavna* moved into action where the authorities were notably absent. Their work in this instance resembles other kinds of post-disaster, post-crisis intervention; though *Bharat Bhavna's* history of connections with these neighbourhoods mean that they are not viewed as outsiders, even though they are not resident in Sundar Bon.

Importance of Festival

Could street groupwork thrive in a society without such an abundance of festivals? In Mark's Manchester youth the main expression of collective community spirit was the annual Whitsuntide parade, organised by the local non-conformist chapels. The northern English mining towns celebrated their community around the annual Miners' galas, with brass bands, floats and processions. More recently, in Mark's Sheffield neighbourhood of Nether Edge they have revived some of this spirit in a community festival. However, these are all annual affairs. In contrast, festival in Maniktala is ubiquitous – turn a corner and you might chance upon a street entirely peopled across its length and breadth with hundreds of squatted participants in a public art competition.

The combination of ritual, plan and improvisation that characterises Festival is mirrored in Indian folk theatre traditions which conform to certain conventions like open performative space, yet combine this with free and fluid mingling of spectators and actors, alongside flexibility

in roles and genres (Singh 2020). The significance of performance is highlighted by the consideration given to arranging a meeting with Kolkata slums drama teacher, Aniruddha Kundu. Groupworkers should indeed join forces with theatre-makers (Ducca 2019).

The ubiquity of Festival means that Maniktala, like other Indian neighbourhoods, has a familiarity with spectacle and its procession through the streets, a very public expression of joy, solidarity and community. These affective bonds, strengthened through the heightened feelings aroused by regularly observed communal rituals, are a strong basis for street groupwork, with existing festivals playing host to the group's activities. An example is *Rakhsha Bandhan,* when hand-ties were threaded throughout the whole community, whatever the individual's status, reinforcing the Gandhian message of *sarma dharma sambhav* – the possibility of communal harmony and religious tolerance.

Moreover, these Festivals are not commodified. Although economic activity undoubtedly increases at festival time, the focus of the festival is community, not commerce. (Chocolate Day is a recent innovation!) [1]

Street Groupwork Outside Maniktala

In this section we consider how *Bharat Bhavna* takes the principles and practices of street groupwork beyond the urban slums of Maniktala.

Life in the village

Hindi is a gendered language, so an inanimate object like a bus has a gender. An English-speaker with some knowledge of other languages might be aware of this possibility, but would never consider that the same object can *change* gender depending on whether it is stationary or not: the bus is male when stopped and female when going. It is a useful metaphor for being open to ever-present and unexpected possibility as Tarun, Sagarika and Mark spend many hours on buses to take street groupwork to schools and communities deep into rural West Bengal.

We turn up at a school and are given warm access to a class full of

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1. *Such is the bizarre contrast in economies, local and global, that the cost of the chocolates for several dozen children in Maniktala is much the same as a strong latte at Kolkata airport …*

children. *'Subprobhat! Ami Mark Doel Sheffield theke esechhi. Ami Anunda peyechhi specially bachha der peye'* – 'Good morning! I'm Mark Doel from Sheffield.[2] I'm very happy especially to see the children.' There is music, song and Tarun and Sagarika introduce *Bijñana Bharat* (the Science model at the core of *Bharat Bhavna*.) Requested to sing, Mark leads the children through *Old MacDonald Had A Farm* and they give enthusiastic expression to Bangla-accented farm animals.

The doors open to us in a similar manner to various schools in the district.

Contact is made with local politicians in sympathy with green socialism, and with a village that lives by socialist and ecological principles. We attend a rally in which speeches are made, an especially impassioned one by a young woman. All of this group-related activity distant from Maniktala is a reminder that the reach of a politicised street groupwork goes well beyond individual groups in a specific community. It underlines the necessity of inter-group alliances and work at the political level if real change is to happen.

Groupwork on the frontline

The humbling nature of street groupwork comes not just from its total commitment, but also from the bravery of its actions in combatting naked power. This can be truly appreciated with the knowledge that social workers have been killed in India fighting power and corruption on behalf of clients (Das and Kulkarni 2006).

This bravery is seen in *Bharat Bhavna's* solidarity with tribes-people in the neighbouring state of Odisha. The story is told through the prism of an object, The Martyrs' Monument, erected at Gandhamardan Hill:

'The Martyrs' Monument represents the importance of social workers fighting for social and economic justice and working directly alongside people to achieve this.

Gandhamardan Hill is part of a range of mountains where there are many naturally occurring waterfalls and hundreds of species of medicinal plants, some of which are very rare. These plants are in dense forest and jungle where 50,000 tribal people live – the Kondhs, the Oraon and Obadas.

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2. *Though, invariably, the young people refer to him as 'London Mr Mark'.*

The state decided to explore the region for bauxite ore and the BALCO company starting blasting dynamite at the mouth of the sacred Kapildhara waterfall. Immediately the waters stopped flowing.

We took part in the movement to stop the stripping of the mountainside and the desecration of the waterfalls. Many people were shot dead and they have become martyrs to the struggle (hence the monument to honour them). Ultimately the Government backed away and mining was discontinued there. But in recent years there is again pressure to resume mining activity. Social work activists are always needed' (Banerjee and Banerjee 2020).

In addition to the strong moral imperative to do what is right, Gandhamardan Hill demonstrates the concerns of street groupwork to build alliances *between* groups, providing practical, sometimes highly risky, support to oppressed peoples. It might seem a paradox – a street groupwork steeped in its own neighbourhood travelling to distant villages and hills in solidarity, but it is entirely consistent with the internationalism of socialist principles and the need to bring different groups together in order to amplify their power.

So, the Maniktala manifestation of *swadeshi* is not parochial. Rural Bengali villages and hillside tribes-people are responsive to the principles and practices of *Bharat Bhavna* and its bridge-building alliances.

Organisational context

Just as Bob Holman (1998) was critical of the 'welfare industry' in the UK, with highly paid executives of charities and directors of social services, so *Bharat Bhavna* is highly sceptical of Indian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), many of which are viewed as corrupt and bribe-driven. Given this outlook, there is no desire to formalise *Bharat Bhavna* into an NGO and it remains entirely voluntary, though that term does not do it justice.

Street groupwork is likely to take place outside any institutional framework. Certainly, there is no benign local authority resourcing the *Bharat Bhavna* activities. The groupworkers live a similar hand to mouth existence to the Maniktala slum-dwellers, gaining occasional paid work to subsidise their streetwork. The organisational drive is political and associational rather than institutional. Links are made with other

democratic socialist groups in other parts of India (at present it is a small party and outside the political mainstream). Tarun is Vice-President of the West Bengal Socialist Party and Sagarika is Vice-President of the Women's Conference of the Socialist Party of India.

The lack of institutional apron strings gives Maniktala street groupwork great autonomy and with that comes responsibility and direct accountability. The community is the arbiter of group activities and sanctions what it allows in its streets.

Implications for Local and International Social Work with Groups

'Kolkata is most often associated across the globe with poverty, pollution and unyielding despair – a city characterised by slums' (Bose 2015: 1).

The world's perspective on Kolkata is not a positive one. This begs two questions.

- *What can a city mired by poverty and gross inequalities teach the rest of the world?*
- Is it possible, or indeed right, to transfer practices from one specific context to other contrasting ones?

In response to the first question, there are different understandings of 'poverty'. Though material circumstances in the slums are exceptionally poor, there are much wealthier communities around the world that are more impoverished when we compare their levels of community solidarity and mutual aid. In part, this is the impact of global capital – the greed for profit fractures and dismembers long-standing neighbourhoods, but global capital has, so far, little interest in Maniktala. In part, the richness of its communal life stems from shared values that prioritise mutualism and solidarity over and above acquisition and individualism. Street groupwork is a product of its environment but it also nurtures that environment, like leaf-fall nourishing the soil on which the tree depends.

In response to the second question, we hope that the chapter has illustrated what can be learned from street groupwork, as a means to mobilise a community and to combine the power of the group with

political awareness, education and action for change. However, the relationship between the local and the global is not straight forward. Here is a short story by way of illumination:

A project to express the meaning of social work invited people to propose objects and the stories attached to them – to 'donate' an object to a *Virtual Exhibition of Social Work* (socialworkin40objects.com). A newly qualified Nigerian social worker donated *lleke ibile* (traditional bead), because it is worn in his village by the elders, whose role he likened to social work:

> *'The traditional leaders meet the social needs of the villagers and also deal with problematic behaviours in the village and find solutions. Today, I see social workers as wearing the Ileke ibile, one which cannot be physically seen or observed. To me,* the social work profession is the Traditional bead' (Ekanele 2017).

> *IIeke ibile* successfully transitions from the particularity of these beads in this village in Nigeria, to universal notions of authority and leadership relevant not just to the Nigerian village, but to the professionalised social work that has developed in the West (Doel 2019).

So, whilst there are features of Maniktala groupwork that are a product of its place, inseparable from the context of bustling street life in a warm clime largely untouched by global capital, there are some aspects that Western communities are already emulating, though the connection is not always understood. One such is valuing local ecosystems. Maniktala's ecology is almost entirely local, with small producers growing and making a huge variety of product, all sold, bought and consumed in the very same locale – Gandhi's notion of *swadeshi* in practice. In affluent nations, restaurants increasingly boast the local provenance of their produce. The paradox is that, unlike in Maniktala, the poor people in rich countries are likely only to be able to afford the Macdonaldised food of global chains.

Writing about the relative success of Indian democracy, Pelinka (2015: 28) states, 'this model, like all models cannot deliver formulas, but rather experiences.' How true this is of Maniktala street groupwork: though the shape of it might be difficult to transfer to many Western contexts, there are many specific elements that can inspire the practices of more formalised 'time and place' groupwork. For example,

the educational aspect of Maniktala groupwork, in which care of the planet is linked to care of the community, the whole seen in a political framework inspired by social and economic justice. The music and songs of solidarity that frequently punctuate the procession of street groupwork are swift, uplifting routes to *groupness* wherever they are experienced – Maniktala, Sheffield, Elsewhere.

As an emblem for the vast canvas of global/local debate, consider the Bengali *ektara,* a single-stringed musical instrument which Tarun plays to accompany his singing. The *ektara* is specific to place, and the reader may never have heard one played, or even heard *of* it; but we all have human voice and we can all put voice together to make music. It is not our ears that need adjustment, but our minds – to allow ourselves to recognise all these different tonal rhythms *as music.*

Recommendations and Conclusion

One of the basic differences between formalised groupwork and street groupwork centres on *place and time.* In formalised groupwork, the space is defined and secured quite specifically as a 'groupwork space'; time, too, is ring-fenced, usually diaried and separated from the time slots before and after. Indeed, research has hinted that a significant reason for the failure of plans for a formalised group to launch can be the inability to find a common time and place at which all prospective members can gather (Doel and Sawdon 1999; Doel 2006). In contrast, street groupwork in Maniktala takes the groupwork to the streets, coalescing with the space and time of street life – itself a busy, shared public environment. The leaders' organisational skills are used to mobilise the street rather than to usher and tether it.

At a personal level, Maniktala street groupwork challenges group leaders to consider their relationships, not just with the group members but with the community which the members inhabit. 'A sense of place allowed people to feel that they belonged not just to a physical location but to a meaningful moral community' writes Furedi (2021: 16) in reference to the moral significance of shared, boundaried space. Immersive groupwork is not to everybody's taste or ability, but it makes us all re-assess our relationships to the hinterland of our groups. At a political level, street groupwork challenges all modes and models of

groupwork to consider how empowerment and social justice become achievements rather than aspirations. Maniktala street groupwork reminds us that all practice is political and that it is best to be honest about this, and follow our values to their conclusion.

Above all, we can only learn from street groupwork if we are open to recognising it *as groupwork*. The power of the Maniktala experience can be readily appreciated, but it becomes transformative only when we can appraise it as groupwork. Then we can embrace the strength of a practice in which social groupworkers do not necessarily emerge from schools of social work but arise from the community itself.

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